

A GROUP OF
ROMAN TERRACOTTA APPLIQUES
FROM ABILA OF THE DECAPOLIS*

by
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Abila,¹ a city of the Decapolis,² has been located and partly excavated near the southern banks of the Yarmuk River at modern Quweilbeh (وادي/ تل القويلبة).³ Apart from other monuments, a glimpse of its importance in antiquity survives especially in its rich cemeteries of chamber tombs, cut into the natural bedrock along the wadi.⁴ One of the graves⁵ preserved a group of three terracotta discs, showing

frontal lion heads (Pl. XXXIII, 1), which are on exhibition at two public archaeological collections in Amman.⁶

These lion masks are made from a finely levigated, buff-brownish clay without surface incrustation. Only the rings, which are fixed in the mouths of the lion heads, are evenly fired. The busts themselves are air dried rather than kiln treated.⁷

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As far as possible the transliteration of Arabic names refers to: *Syrie- Répertoire Alphabétique des Noms des Lieux Habités*, ed. by Le Service Géographique des Forces Françaises du Levant, 3rd. ed., 1945.

1. Cf. H. Bietenhard, *ZDPV* 79, 1977, p. 24ff. (= *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II, 8, ed. H. Temporini — W. Haase 1977, p. 220ff.); A. Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*, ed. M. Piccirillo (1978), p. 13ff., p. 48ff.
2. G. Schumacher, *Abila of the Decapolis* (1889); *Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites*, ed. R. Stillwell [2nd ed. (1979)]

p. 4 s.v. Abila (A. Negev); Cf. the bibliography by D. Homès-Fredericq — J. B. Hennessy, *Archaeology of Jordan I*, Akkadika Suppl. III (1986) p. 232 s.v. Quweilbeh; Ancient literary sources: P. Thomsen, *Loca Sancta*, Repr. of the ed. 1907 (1966) p. 14 s.v. Abila; C. Möller — G. Schmidt, *Siedlungen Palästinas nach Flavius Josephus. Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients Reihe B (Geisteswissenschaften) XIV* (1976) p. 195 s.v. Abila. For the Decapolis as a Roman administrative entity, see S. Thomas Parker, "The Decapolis Reviewed", *Journal of Bib. Lit.*, 94 (1975), p. 437-441; B. Isaac, *ZPE*, 44 (1981) p. 67-74.

3. For the location cf. *Princeton Encyclopedia loc. cit.* map 6, EA 1; *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients* sheet BV 19: *Siedlungen nach Flavius Josephus* (1980); *Codex KulturAtlas: Der Nahe Osten*, Blatt 32/35: Tiberias (1:25,000), E6.
4. Cf. H. Mare, *ADAJ* 28 (1984) p. 41ff.; C. Vibert-Guige — A. Barbet, *ADAJ* 26 (1982) p. 67ff.
5. According to references in the museum inventories and in the Registration Center of the Department of Antiquities, Amman, all three appliques come from the tomb Nr. 16. Cf. note 9.
6. Amman, University Museum Inv.- Nr. 22/23 (formerly Amman, Jordan Archaeological Museum J. 8666) and Amman, Jordan Archaeological Museum Inv.-Nr. 8664 and 8665.
7. The piece from Jordan University (see note 6) was researched by H.-J. Kunkel, conservator at the German Mining Museum at Bochum (Amman, April 1986).

In iconography, style, measurements,⁸ and technique, all these discs are so coherent and their unity as a group so certain, that one does not hesitate to assert their production by one workshop only. The discs have smooth border-frames, unprofiled at the ridges, but slightly sloped. In the centers frontal lion heads are raised to a relatively high relief. Between the teeth of the opened mouth originally movable clay rings were affixed. All three examples preserve these completely or in more or less large fragments. From the pierced throat the long and rounded tongue is hanging on the lower jaw. The wedge-shaped muzzle is flattened at its front, details such as whiskers and nostrils are incised into the buff, wet clay. The mane of flat relief is arranged in long hairs, also incised with a knife or a wooden spatula, parted at the forehead and falling in long obverse tufts from the smooth and slender cheeks. The lips and the eye-brows are made from small rolled lumps of clay, glued to the surface in a wet condition. Originally all three masks were painted. On the eyeballs one recognizes traces of a white wash; on the faces and rings remains a small amount of a thick dark-grey paint; at the tongue and lips are pinkish colors. Without chemical analysis it is impossible to determine whether the dark grey pigments consist of a type of silver sulphate.

These terracotta appliques demonstrate

a four-phase production. The basic disc is cast in a mould; hand-modelled features were added. In a leather-like, just slightly dried stage of the working process, the attachments were nailed by iron studs to a wooden background. The third phase of production demonstrates why these clay appliques were not fired, but dried in the air. Finally, the masks were painted.

All three appliques come from one rock-cut tomb. Since the context of the finds is not published, the inventory of the burial does not provide any chronological information.⁹ Nevertheless, questions concerning the original purpose of these discs may be answered by observing typological analogies.

As the traces of the greyish color on the faces indicate, apparently these clay lion heads holding rings in their mouths copy metal prototypes. The iconographical type was invented by a Greek artist during the fourth or fifth century B.C.¹⁰ In Hellenistic Macedonia metal attachments showing lion busts holding rings in their mouths are known as door handles of private houses and portals of chamber tombs,¹¹ and also as shoulder straps of a soldier's armour.¹² In their use as "door-knockers" and armour attachments they can be followed from the Roman Imperial period into both the Oriental and European Middle Ages.¹³ This Hellenistic-Greek iconographical type most probably was brought to

8. Amman, Jordan University Inv.-Nr. 22/23: Diameter of the disc: 18.15 cm; Height of the relief, 9cm; Diameter of the ring 9.5-9.95 cm; Amman, Jordan Archaeological Museum Inv.-Nr. 8664: Diameter of the disc 18.3-18.5 cm; Height 9.3 cm; Diameter of the ring 9.5 cm. Inv.Nr. 8665: Diameter of the disc 19.3 cm; Height 8.5 cm.
9. There is a reference to tomb 16 as place of discovery, which is Nr. H 1 of the American Expedition of the Covenant Theological Seminary at St. Louis, Missouri, USA. An inscription, quoted by M. el-'Abedi (*ADAJ* 4/5, (1960) p.26, Arabic section) points to the year 47 B.C. It is sure that the tomb was in use for all the Roman Imperial period and also during the Byzantine epoch. Cf. Mare (see note 4) 43. On the basis of information given by the documentation at the Registration Center of the Antiquities

Department, Amman, it is not possible to say to which of these burials the terracotta discs originally belonged.

10. O. Kurz, *Studia Hierosolymitana* 24 (1972) p.41.
11. Cf. E. Meyer in: *Festschrift E. v. Mercklin* (1964) p.80ff. For the door-knocker from Olynthus: D.M. Robinson, *Olynthus X* (1941) p.249ff. Nr. 898 Pl. LXVI-LXVII; For the bronzes from Langada and Pydna: B. Gossel, *Makedonische Kammergräber*, Ph.D. Berlin (1980) p.150 Nr. d with note 780, p.224 with note 1132.
12. M. Andronikos, *Antike Welt* 13,1 (1982), p.31, Fig.16; idem. *Vergina, The Royal Tombs*, (1984) p.137ff, colour pl. 138f.
13. Meyer, *loc. cit.* 80ff.; U. Mende, *Die Türzieher des Mittelalters*. Bronzegeräte des Mittelalters II (1981) p.128ff.

the Near East during its conquest by Alexander the Great, and from there extended as far as China.¹⁴ From the first century A. D.¹⁵ onward we can observe in the eastern Levant a special burial custom of embellishing wooden coffins with lion-headed metal discs and rings. Many graves along the Levantine coast and in the Syro-Palestinian inland area provide numerous such bronzes and several times fragments of the cedar or juniper wood of the coffins are preserved.¹⁶ As with the terracotta rings of the Abila find, most of these bronze discs could not have been used to lift the sarcophagus or to lower it into the grave with the help of ropes. Instead, copies of such coffins in limestone, representing those lion heads from the first century A. D.,¹⁷ prove that garlands of leaves, flowers and fruits were hung longitudinally on the faces of the coffins, fastening the ends of the garlands by straps on the rings.¹⁸ Thus, the statement of F. Cumont, that these sarcophagus attachments adapt the banal scheme of a "door-knocker"¹⁹ has to be revised. Most probably these metal attachments,

showing the lion as the traditional protector of the dead, were necessary to adorn the sarcophagus with garlands during the *Prothesis* and *Ekphora*, i. e. portions of the burial ceremony, as a symbol of immortality.²⁰ In this respect, the stone garlanded sarcophagi of the Roman sepulchral sculpture have a historical background which originates in the Near East and which spread together with the oriental religions during the second and third centuries A. D. all over the empire.²¹

Distinguishing characteristics of style and technology demonstrate the production of these bronzes at several regional centers, thus accounting for the provenances of their discovery in the Near East (Fig. 1).²²

The first group (Type I, Fig. 1, Symbol ■) originates from Sidon, the provenance of the earliest copies of coffins with garlands and lion heads made from limestone.²³ The bronzes consist of thin sheet (Pl. XXXIII, 2),²⁴ partially also made from silver (Pl. XXXIV, 1),²⁵ which were filled

14. Kurz, *loc. cit.* p. 40.

15. Cf. The grave at Ḥoms/Abu Ṣabun: H. Seyrig, *Syria* 30, (1953) p. 14f.

16. Cf. E. von Mercklin, *Archäologischer Anzeiger* (1926) p. 293; idem: *Führer durch das Hamburgische Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe* II (1930) p. 167f. A piece of juniper wood is preserved at the reverse of a bronze attachment from Tell Umm Ḥauran, now: Damascus, National Museum Inv.-Nr. 19634.

17. G. Koch, *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 1977, p. 111ff.; F. Baratte—C. Metzger, *Catalogue des Sarcophages en pierre d'Époques Romaine et Paléochrétienne*, Musée du Louvre (1985) p. 294ff. Nr. 196-198; A. Konikoff, *Sarcophagi from the Jewish Catacombs of Ancient Rome* (1986) p. 32f. Nr. 9 Pl. 7.

18. Koch, *loc. cit.* p. 119 Fig. 8-9.

19. F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le Symbolisme Funéraire des Romains*. BAH XXXV (1966) p. 338.

20. Cf. V.M. Strocka in: *Festschrift F.K. Dörner* II (1978) p. 893f.; H. von Hesberg, *Römische Mitteilungen* 88, (1981) p. 201.; Cumont *loc. cit.* p. 245, p. 297 note 1, p. 317f., p. 458, p. 465. Possibly a glimpse of this ancient custom survives in

the modern burial habit of showing palm leaves in front of the cortege as a symbol of immortality: Cf. T. Canaan, *ZDPV* 75, (1959), p. 105.

21. Cf. F. Cumont, *Die orientalischen Religionen im römischen Heidentum* (8th ed.) (1981) passim; A. Hatem, *AAAS* 11/12 (1961/62) p. 83f.

22. Cf. J. Chehadé—L. Khalil—Th. Weber, *Syrisch-Römische Sarkophagbeschläge - Orientalische Bronzewerkstätten römischer Zeit. Damaszener Forschungen* (forthcoming).

23. Cf. Koch, *loc. cit.* (See note 17) 111f.; For Sidon see *Princeton Encyclopedia loc. cit.* (see note 2) p. 837 s.v. Sidon (J.P. Rey-Coquais).

24. Paris, Louvre 3454, from Sidon: G. Perrot—Ch. Chipiez, *Histoire de l'Art dans l'Antiquité* III (1885) p. 194 with fig. 137; A. De Ridder, *Les Bronzes Antiques du Louvre* II: Les Instruments (1915) p. 176f. Nr. 3453ff.

25. Damascus, National Museum Inv. 10334/4510 and 10337/4513, from Ḥoms, Abu Ṣabun tomb 10: H. Seyrig, *Syria* 30 (1953) p. 14f. (without fig.); B. Zouhdi, *Musée National de Damas* (1976) p. 87 Nr. 4 (without fig.).

from behind with a core of gypsum or bronze.²⁶ The representation of the lion face is always very summary in character, or schematic. The opened mouths are shown in flat relief. The movable rings are attached by a crimped iron with two tangs, both of them twisted on the reverse of the attachment.²⁷ The borders of the discs were stabilized upon the wooden walls of the coffin by iron nails.

The provenances of the second group (Type II, Fig. 1, Symbol ●) are scattered over the northern Syrian regions. With regard to the technology, the casting technique of the "lost-wax" method is typical for this group. The separately casted rings are fitted into the mouths, always represented by a flat, cut-out relief. Many of the busts have wide circular corners on the mouths (Pl. XXXIV, 2).²⁸ Stylistically, this group of lion heads is more correlated with the naturalistic prototypes of the Mediterranean Hellenistic world, even though a gradual "decline" to a more graphical abstraction of the physiognomy can be seen. The short, velvet-like skin of the face is indicated by small engraved dashes, the large, visible teeth between the upper and lower jaws hold the ring in its position.

Details such as the contracted brows above the nasal bone tend to a linear, leaf-shaped abstraction (Pl. XXXV, 1).²⁹ Some of the less elaborate pieces (Pl. XXXV, 2)³⁰ show a rather schematic arrangement of the mane. Due to the concentration of finds at Homs, ancient Emesa,³¹ this Northern Syrian city could be the location of one of the leading centers of production.

A third group appears in Southern Syria (Type III, Fig. 1, Symbol ▲). Most of the finds come from the Hauran mountains and from the fertile plain which slopes from them to the West.³² The distribution of finds reaches the northern Palestinian coast and the highlands of Galilee, where the cities of Jaffa³³ and Nablus³⁴ are assumed as provenances. All the bronzes of the third type consist of thin sheet metal, apparently pressed and modelled over a positive mould. Many of these sheet attachments show the same iconographical "mistake", already reported by E. von Mercklin, of one example acquired by the Art and Industry Museum at Hamburg.³⁵ There is a slight displacement of the parted mane to the right of the forehead and to the left under the chin. Other pieces cohere in style and iconography to such an extent

26. E. von Mercklin, *loc. cit.* (see note 16, 1926) p. 304ff. The silver sheet appliques from Homs (see note 25) are filled with a core of bronze and not iron, *cf.* P. C. Bol-Th. Weber, *Bildwerke aus Bronze und Bein aus minoischer bis byzantinischer Zeit. Wissenschaftliche Kataloge des Liebieghauses II*, ed. H. Beck - P. C. Bol (1985) p. 162 Nr. 77.
27. E. von Mercklin, *loc. cit.*, p. 305 fig. 10.
28. Mayence, Römisch Germanisches Zentralmuseum Inv. 0.38422, from the environs of Aleppo (unpublished).
29. Damascus, National Museum 1254/7320 and 1255/7321, from Homs (unpublished).
30. Aleppo, National Museum Inv. 129 (formerly Damascus, National Museum 11991/5425) from Hama (unpublished).
31. *Princeton Encyclopedia loc. cit.* (See note 2) p. 302 s. v. Emesa (J. -P. Rey-Coquais).
32. *Cf.* G. Rindfleisch, *ZDPV* 21 (1898) p. 1ff.; F. Huguët in: *Hauran I*, 1 ed.

- J. -M. Dentzer, *BAH CXXIV* (1985) p. 5ff.
33. *Princeton Encyclopedia loc. cit.* p. 426 s. v. Joppa (A. Negev): Stuttgart, Württembergisches Landesmuseum 460A, from Jaffa; E. von Mercklin, *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen* 3 (1958) p. 222 (without fig.). Meyer *loc. cit.* (See note 11) p. 87.
34. *Princeton Encyclopedia loc. cit.* p. 330 s. v. Flavia Neapolis (A. Negev): Copenhagen, National Museum Inv. Nr. 8470, from Nablus. I owe thanks to K. Parlasca (Erlangen) for the information about this unpublished piece.
35. E. von Mercklin *loc. cit.* p. 221 with fig. 5; more examples for this: Chehadé - Khalil - Weber (forthcoming, see note 22). A single disc without provenance is published by D. Schütz, *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 75, 1931, 289 (opposite pl.); E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period VII 1: Pagan Symbols in Judaism*. Bollingen Series XXXVI (1958) p. 34, fig. 24, right.

that they all must come from one mould (Pl. XXXVI, 1).³⁶ Also these sheet appliques were affixed by iron nails upon the wooden coffin. The movable rings, as far as they are preserved, are made from a flat, hammered wire of lead and fitted to the "cut-out" mouths. As already evident with the terracotta rings of the Abila group, the leaden rings of this type are not suitable to lift the coffin with the corpse. As striking elements of the style, one notes on all of these bronze sheets the "pathetical" contraction of the eye-brows, the anthropomorphic, nose-shaped muzzle and the flat shaping of the cheeks. The Ḥauran provides in basalt examples of the same type used as "door-knockers"³⁷ and ornaments of sarcophagi³⁸ as well. While the focus of these finds is of little current importance from a political or cultural standpoint, in antiquity Bostra³⁹ was the administrative and economic center of the Southern Ḥauran and, therefore, an excellent candidate for the place of production of the third group.

A trend to a more abstract representation of the lion's face can be observed in the fourth group (Type IV, Fig. 1, Symbol ◆), which was common in the Golan area.⁴⁰ The bronzes of this group consist of thin bronze sheets, shaped to circular plates with a concentric step, and a half-globular knob in its center. Sometimes this is figured by *repoussé* work to a rather ab-

stract lion's bust (Pl. XXXVI, 2),⁴¹ while most of the *attachments* known today have very few or no embellishments (Pl. XXXVII, 1).⁴² Some of the stepped borders of the discs have simple geometric ornaments punched from the reverse of the disc. The ring is fixed in a way similar to those in the Sidonian group (Type I), but here it was always positioned underneath the central knob or the chin of the lion.⁴³ The discs themselves were nailed upon the wooden coffin by iron studs. A fifth group has been located in Gerasa (Jerash) and its environs (Type V, Fig. 1, Symbol ►). Some unprovenanced pieces which are presently in museums of Jordan (Pl. XXXVII, 3)⁴⁴ are so similar to those from Gerasa, that this was likely to have been their centre of production.⁴⁵ The lion faces of flat relief with a rather unskilled representation of the physiognomy seem to be provincial imitations of the Syrian prototypes. The sheet bronze heads are worked in *repoussé*, and the open mouths appear in relief. The rings, which are also made from thin rolled bronze sheets, are fixed into drilled holes at the corners of the mouths. The mane of the lion is sparse and is framed by a concentric *torus*, sometimes stylized as a rope by engraved hatching. One fragment found in one of the vaulted mausoleums near Hadrian's arch at Gerasa (Pl. XXXVII, 2)⁴⁶ represents an example better in quality, but belonging to the same group

36. Bostra, Archaeological Museum Inv. 97 (C.37) from the Ḥauran (unpublished).

37. Cf. S. Diebner, *Rivista di Archeologia* 6 (1982) p.66 Nr. 44 fig. 53. Cf. the epigraphical evidence for lions as embellishments of doors: D. Sourdel, *Les Cultes du Ḥauran à l'Époque Romaine*, BAH, CV (1952) 26 note 4.

38. E. Littmann — D. Magie Jr. — D.R. Stuart, *Greek and Latin Inscriptions in Syria: Bosra*, in: Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1904- 1905 and 1909 III A 4 (1913) p.254 (with fig.).

39. *Princeton Encyclopedia loc. cit.* p.159f. s.v. Bosra (J.-P. Rey-Coquais); M. Sartre, *Bostra - Des Origines à l'Islam*, BAH CXVII (1985).

40. G. Schumacher, *The Jaulan* (1888); D.

Urman, *The Golan. A Profile of a Region During the Roman and Byzantine Periods*. British Archaeological Reports International Series 269 (1985).

41. Frankfort, Liebieghaus Inv. 1610, provenance unknown. Bol-Weber *loc. cit.* (See note 26) p.163ff. Nr. 78.

42. Irbid, Yarmouk University, Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology Inv. Nr. 325 A and D, from Umm Qais (unpublished).

43. See note 27.

44. Salt, Archaeological Museum Inv.-Nr.347 (unpublished).

45. *Princeton Encyclopedia loc. cit.* (see note 2) p.348f. s.v. Gerasa (W.L. MacDonald; *Jerash International Project 1981-1983 I*, ed. F. Zayadine (1986).

46. F. Zayadine in: *Jerash International Project I loc. cit.* p.12ff.

in terms of technique and iconography.

Our research about these bronze attachments from Syria and Jordan leads to the following results concerning the sixth group (Type VI, Fig. 1, Symbol ◀) from Abila: These three examples, so far unique in their clay material, are attachments of a wooden coffin. They demonstrate a coherence to their bronze counterparts both in the way of affixing to the wood by iron nails and iconography. Thus, they can be explained as direct copies from the metal ones. Ancient craftsmen often imitated metal work with the less expensive ceramic material.⁴⁷ Rarely are we so well informed about copies and prototypes as has been demonstrated for the group of Roman terracotta appliques from Abila of the Decapolis.

Acknowledgements

Fig. 1: Drawing by the author; Pl. XXXXIII, 1: Neg. Jordan University, Institute for Archaeology; Pl. XXXIII, 2: Paris, Musée du Louvre (Neg. M. Chuzeville); Pls. XXXIV, 1. XXXV, 1. XXXV, 2. XXXVI, 1. Neg. German Archaeological Institute, Damascus (1984) 433.438; (1985) 172.489 (P. Grunwald); Pl. XXXIV, 1: Mayence, Römisch Germanisches-Zentralmuseum Neg. T. 69/233; Pls. XXXVII, 1—XXXVII, 3: Neg. of the author.

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47. Cf. G. Schneider-Hermann, *Bull. Ant. Beschavinge* 38, 1963, p.92ff.; idem, *Bull. Ant. Beschavinge* 37, 1962, p.51ff.; E.D. Reeder, *Clay Impressions from Attic Metalwork*, Ph.D. Princeton University

(1974). Similar to the Abila appliques was the purpose of the Tarentine terracotta attachments: R. Lullies, *Vergoldete Terrakotta-Appliken aus Tarent*. 7. Ergänzungsheft der Römischen Mitteilungen (1962).

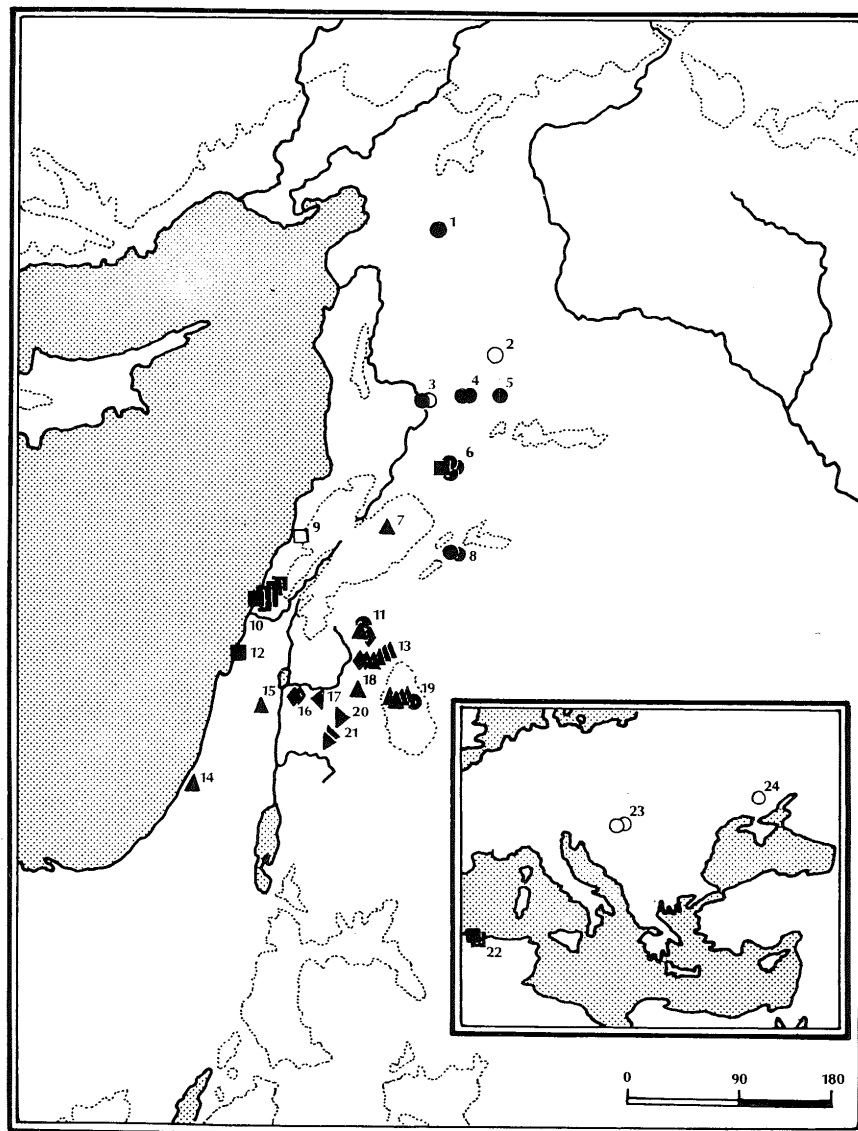


Fig. 1. Distribution of findspots of metal attachments.

Symbols ■ = Type I
 ● = Type II
 ▲ = Type III
 ◆ = Type IV
 ► = Type V
 ◄ = Type VI
 □ ○ = Provenances not certain

1: Aleppo (see Pl. XXXIV, 2); 2: Qaşr Ibn-Oudarne; 3: Ḥama (see Pl. XXXV, 2); 4: Sélémiye; 5: Sabboûra; 6: Ḥomş (see Pls. XXXIV, 1 and XXXV, 1); 7: Ras Ba'albek; 8: 'Aqaba near Nébék; 9: Byblos; 10: Sidon (see Pl. XXXIII, 2); 11: Tell Umm Ḥauran; 12: Tyrus; 13: al-Asarî near Tafas; 14: Jaffa; 15: Nablus; 16: Umm Qais/Gadara (see Pl. XXXVII, 1); 17: Quweilbeh/Abila (see Pl. XXXIII, 1); 18: Ezraa; 19: Djebel Druze/Ḥauran (see Pl. XXXVI, 1); 20: Khirbet Quri near Jerash; 21: Jerash/Gerasa (see Pl. XXXVII, 2); 22: Skikda; 23: "from Rumania"; 24: "from Gaimk, Southern Russia".

